

FREDERICKSBURG, VA.
FREE LANCE-STAR

E-14,031

SEP 19 1967

Privacy Invasion Curb

The Senate took a heartening step when it overwhelmingly approved a bill to curb government agencies' interference in the private lives of their employees. This measure, if it now gets through the House, should be an important step toward slowing down the trend toward invasion of individual privacy.

As enacted by the Senate, the bill makes adequate provision for inquiry where this is essential for security reasons. Three agencies - the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency - are expressly permitted to use polygraph and psychological tests to elicit data on such matters as religion, sexual conduct and other personal relationships in such cases.

Much more rigid limitations are rightly placed on personal inquiry by other executive agencies of the government, however.

They are prohibited from forcing personnel or job applicants to disclose information of a personal nature, including personal finances except where there appears to be a possible conflict of interest. Moreover, pressure by superiors to engage in political or other outside activities, buy U.S. bonds, or make political or charitable contributions is forbidden.

In the words of the bill's sponsor, Senator Erwin of North Carolina, it is intended to "protect the constitutional rights of civilian employees of the executive branch and to prevent unwarranted governmental invasions of privacy." This is of no small importance. Action has come in response to rising complaints about unwarranted snooping into private concerns. If enacted into law, the measure will constitute a badly needed charter of rights for many who work for the government.

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